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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a model of study mode negotiation between clients and English Language Training providers that has been developed at the University of Malaya, specifically related to English language writing skills as taught to corporate clients. Negotiation is used to reach decisions concerning the goals and methodology of learning to ensure cooperation and enhance satisfaction with the learning process. The methodology is based on an understanding that the business sector consists of highly-specialized discourse communities as defined by John Swales (1990). This paper demonstrates the relationship between the initial interview, discussion, and final decision on which the training contract depends and the significance of the relationship for the creation of a successful English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. Study mode negotiation involves an interview with the learner and his/her employer and analysis of the two interviews, followed by decisions and recommendations that are subsequently renegotiated before the service commences. At first, this may appear to be a needs assessment of the student, but it is actually a needs assessment of the student as well as the needs of the end-user of the learner's services. The approach uses "authentic" texts. An "authentic" text is defined as a text that is current with an identifiable social purpose. The complete methodology consists of interview, diagnosis, prognosis, negotiation of study mode, preparation of course content, treatment, and evaluation. (Contains 15 references.) (NAV)

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Study mode negotiation

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ED 395 462

Abstract: *Increased demand for English language training (ELT) services in the information age has led to the development of an ELT industry. This has in turn required the language teaching/research community to make greater efforts to view the services it provides from the perspective of its clientele.*

One of the features of this new relationship is the emphasis given to the role of negotiation between clients and ELT providers in determining the learning encounter. This paper outlines a model of study mode negotiation that has been developed at the University of Malaya, in the specific context of the provision of training in English writing skills to corporate clients.

Introduction

The recent use of the term *language training industry* signals a paradigm shift that has significant implications for both providers and users of language services worldwide, particularly in those countries where mastery of a second language is viewed as crucial to self-development or as a "ticket" to employment.

The Malaysian people's goal of attaining the status of a fully-developed nation by the year 2020, of being a producer as well as a consumer of advanced technologies, is highly dependent on the nation's ability to communicate effectively in the international arena (Mahathir 1991). All sectors of the Malaysian economy, and in particular the industrial sectors, are therefore taking steps to ensure they have this capability and, since English is *the* language of science and technology, the consequence has been a high demand for English language training (ELT) services.

The providers of these services are still reeling from the impact of this demand, as the English language has suddenly been catapulted back into favour, its status in Malaysia having shifted from that of a relatively unimportant second language to its present position as the chosen medium

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of communication on the information highway and throughout the global business community. This change of status is confirmed elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region by Estad & Ferryman (1991), Goh & Chan (1993), and Le Vasan (1994).

The scene is thus set for the providers of ELT services to follow the goals set by industry in "optimizing" the current demand for their services. The first step has been to examine and adapt to the "alien" culture of the industries in which the providers now have to function. Such a move has forced the language teaching/ research community to reconsider its aims and its perspectives, and to bring these more into line with those of its clients. This has in turn brought about the paradigm shift that has positioned at centre stage the goals and value systems of the business community, requiring the more academically-inclined language teaching/research community to work within this newly-defined territory (Tickoo 1994; Sargunan & Chelliah-Tam 1994).

One of the features of this new working relationship is the emphasis given to the role of **negotiation** between clients and ELT providers in determining the learning encounter. Negotiation is used to reach decisions concerning the goals and methodology of learning, in order to ensure cooperation and consequently to enhance satisfaction. This paper outlines our model of study mode negotiation, based on experience gained in providing training in English writing skills to corporate clients, as part of a writing skills team of the Language Centre of the University of Malaya.

Theoretical underpinnings

Our methodology is built on the understanding that the business sector consists of highly-specialized communities that possess all the characteristics of a discourse community as identified by Swales (1990). These communities have:

(i) common goals;
(ii) participatory mechanisms which are actively used to provide information and feedback;
(iii) community-specific genres;
(iv) a highly-specialized terminology; and
(v) a high level of expertise.

Since this theory of discourse is based on the premise that members of the community should be familiar with particular genres used in the communicative furtherance of goals, the present study has also made use of the concept of *genre*, defined by Swales (1981: 10*f*) as:

> a more or less standardized communicative event with a goal or set of goals mutually understood by the participants in that event and occurring within a functional rather than a personal or social setting.

Another major line of thought that has influenced our research is the "ecological approach to ESP" propounded by Holliday and Cooke (1983). According to this approach (*art.cit.*: 124), ESP (English for Specific Purposes) can only "take root, grow, bear fruit and propagate in the local soil". In order to investigate thoroughly the nature of this local soil, we chose to adopt an ethnographic approach to our research issue, since such an approach is ideally suited to a situation in which the ESP practitioner is compelled to encounter and make sense of a strange new world that abides by an alien culture (Agar 1986).

These theories form the backdrop against which the work reported in this paper has been carried out. Our interview schedules and the Study Mode Analysis Record Form (see below) were devised with the aim in mind of developing an effective strategy for building the foundation of a viable ESP course (in this case, for the teaching of professional writing). All the questions and decisions in our research have been guided by the objective of creating a customized language service that provides total client satisfaction. In line with standard business practice we have also taken into account the value placed on time, and have thus adopted the KISS (*Keep it simple, stupid!*) principle in framing our interview schedule.

This paper attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the initial interview, discussion and final decision on which the training contract depends, and the significance of this relationship for the creation of a successful ESP course. It is in these areas that ESP consultant/ practitioners need most help in order to ensure that the service they are providing is truly professional: this will in turn ensure that they are accorded appropriate status by the client. A poor relationship between client and provider, and the absence of a proper contract between them, have often proved to be the major stumbling-blocks in ESP programmes (Roe 1994; Sargunan 1995).

Study mode negotiation

Study mode negotiation is carried out in three phases:

(i) Interview with the learner
(ii) Interview with the learner's employer
(iii) Analysis of the interviews, followed by the formulation of decisions and recommendations that are subsequently renegotiated before the service commences

At first glance this may seem like a conventional needs analysis, but a closer inspection will reveal that it investigates issues that are more closely related not only to the needs of the learner but also to those of the end-user of the learner's services. Moreover, our approach advocates the use of *authentic* - as opposed to merely original - texts. An *authentic text* is here defined as a text that is current, and that has an identifiable social purpose; namely, it is used by the learners in the process of carrying out their job functions.

Our methodology, briefly put, comprises the following components:

(i) Initial **interview** with the learner and employer to obtain relevant personal, educational and professional particulars
(ii) **Diagnosis** of learning difficulties
(iii) **Prognosis**: deciding the best method to overcome these difficulties
(iv) **Negotiation** of study mode in the light of both diagnosis and prognosis
(v) **Preparation** of course content and decisions on appropriate methodology
(vi) **Treatment**: implementing the service based on agreed procedures and commitments
(vii) **Evaluation**: analyzing the written product to provide feedback and to determine the degree of success of the service

Rationale behind interview schedule for learners

The interview schedule for learners is presented in Appendix A. The following table summarizes the rationale behind the categories of questions asked in the interview:

CATEGORY OF QUESTIONS	RATIONALE
1. Personal data	Places learner in the context of the learning situation
2. Discourse community	Information gathered from responses to these questions provides insights into: • the actual working environment of the sub-community, which may vary slightly from the mother community • the specialized setting in which the employee operates • the immediate communicative needs - this will allow for customized teaching • the genres that need to be taught in relation to job function and documents
3. Writing needs and difficulties	Information enables consultant to: • diagnose learner's problems • negotiate course goals/ objectives • ensure that objectives of learner are met
4. Level of commitment	Information important in: • negotiating with the employer regarding target attainment level, length of course, work release, schedule (whether during office hours or outside), etc. • reaching decisions concerning the methodology to be adopted

Table 1: Summary of rationale behind interview schedule for learners

Rationale behind interview schedule for the employer

The interview schedule for the employer is presented in Appendix B. The following table summarizes the rationale behind the question topics that form the basis of the interview:

QUESTION TOPICS	RATIONALE
1. Reasons for employee undergoing training	Determination of employer's perspective on course goals and objectives
2. Employee's role in company/department	Comparison of employer's perspective of employee's job function with learner's perspective in order to establish that there is not a mismatch
3. Expectations in terms of production of documents	Identification of genres that need to be taught from employer's viewpoint
4. Employee's writing difficulties as perceived by the employer	Diagnosis of learner's writing problems as perceived by employer and/or reader(s) of documents
5. Target achievements	Need to be determined for purposes of course design. Basis for negotiation
6. Employer's level of commitment and constraints with regard to time and involvement	Enables consultant to negotiate: • performance levels • number of document types that can be taught/learnt • joint responsibility in evaluation of performance at end of course • fees • course extensions if needed/ desired

Table 2: Summary of rationale behind interview schedule for employer

Rationale behind the Study Mode Analysis Record Form

The Study Mode Analysis Record Form (SMARF) is reproduced in Appendix C. The following table summarizes the rationale behind the data recorded on the SMARF:

SECTION	DESCRIPTION	RATIONALE
Personal data	Name, designation, department of learner	Personalization and customization of service
Learner objectives	Conflation of perceptions of learner, employer and consultant	Allows achievable learning goals and outcomes to be set. Engages interest and motivation of learner
Learner difficulties	Conflation of perceptions of learner, employer and consultant	Enables development of effective learning strategies
Level of ability: mastered/needs to master	Pre- and post-treatment analysis	Enables learner and employer to evaluate effectiveness of service. Provides data for Action Research
Course content	Content determined according to learner objectives, learner difficulties, and time available. Teaching outcomes prioritized based on negotiation	Record of course content for future reference allows continuity in the event of future programs
Recommend-ations	Suggestions made to learner and employer by consultant to chart future directions for training	Provides value-added service in terms of professional advice based on expert opinion. Paves ground for future negotiations and possible continuation of partnership

Resource materials	Authentic materials used in teaching the course for record purposes and for future reference	Constitutes a resource for ESP research and practice. Crucial to our methodology
Filing information	Administrative data held on hard copy or on-line	Maximum accessibility of information for future reference
Miscellaneous	Other relevant information	Provides record of unanticipated contingencies that may have relevance to negotiations and/or to the teaching of the course

Table 3: Summary of rationale behind data recorded on the Study Mode Analysis Record Form

Conclusion

As mentioned above, one of the first steps to be taken in order to function effectively in the new working relationship is for ELT providers to adopt and adapt to the culture of the clients. The business sector, which constitutes a significant proportion of our clientele, holds TCS (Total Customer Service) and TQM (Total Quality Management) as its watchwords; if we, too, are to incorporate these concepts into our new teaching/research paradigm, then negotiation between client and provider is essential. Indeed, the day may come in the not-too-distant future where we may have to obtain ISO 9000 certification (or its equivalent) for our services in order to function in a competitive market economy!

This paper has shown that it is possible to negotiate an effective understanding between client and provider with regard to the provision of language services, and that such an understanding has proved to be a strong foundation on which to construct an ESP programme. We believe that this research will be of interest to our colleagues, as it will pave the way for much-needed further research in the fields of ethnography and genre studies.

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Appendix A: Interview schedule for learners

1. *Personal data*

Name
Institution
Department
Designation
Education/professional qualifications
Working experience

2. *Discourse community*

2.1. What is the nature of your company's business?

2.2. What is your department concerned with?

2.3. What is your role in the company/department?

2.4. What kinds of documents do you produce as part of your job function?

2.5. What is the purpose of these documents?

2.6. Who are the readers of these documents - direct and indirect?

2.7. Does your company/department have an in-house style sheet?

2.8. Do you follow this or are you free to customize?

3. *Writing needs and difficulties*

3.1. Please provide samples of:

(i) your preferred in-house style; and

(ii) samples of your own writing that you have produced as part of your job (both good and bad).

3.2. What are the difficulties that you face when creating the work-related documents that you have mentioned?

3.3. In terms of general English language proficiency, where would you place yourself on a 4-point scale, where 4 represents the highest level of proficiency?

1		2		3		4	

3.4. With regard to the documents you want to write, where would you place yourself on this same scale?

1		2		3		4	

3.5. What do you hope to have attained by the end of this course in terms of:

(i) documents produced;

(ii) general level of language proficiency in relation to the documents; and

(iii) resources that you need?

4. *Level of commitment*

4.1. How many hours are you prepared to spend on this course and when?

4.2. Are you also prepared to put in effort during non-contact hours if necessary?

Appendix B: Interview schedule for the employer

1. Why do you want this employee to attend an English writing skills course?

2. What is the employee's role in the organization/department?

3. What exactly would you like the employee to have learnt by the end of this course?

4. Please list the documents you would like the employee to be able to produce.

5. What documents is the employee currently expected to produce?

6. What do you feel are the employee's weaknesses in producing these documents?

7. In terms of general English language proficiency, where would you place the employee on a 4-point scale, where 4 represents the highest level of proficiency?

1		2		3		4	

8. With regard to writing the documents you want the employee to produce, where would you place him/her on this same scale?

1		2		3		4	

9. For the purposes of learning to produce these documents, how much time are you prepared to spare the employee from work duties?

10. Would you or your representative please be available, for evaluation purposes, to participate with the language training consultant in the assessment of the learner's level of attainment.

11. After we have assessed the employee's level of proficiency we will inform you of the number of hours we need to help him/her with the required skills. At the end of the agreed time we may need to re-negotiate the hours to match your goal or expectation of performance.

12. Cost of language training consultancy and service:

Appendix C: Study Mode Analysis Record Form

File Number:	
Genre:	
Institution:	
Date:	

Personal data

Name:
Designation:
Department:

Learner objectives

According to learner:
According to employer:
According to consultant:

Learner difficulties

According to learner:
According to employer:
According to consultant:

Level of ability: mastered/needs to master:

Proposed course content:

Facilitator(s):

Recommendations:

Resource materials:

Tuition cost per hour:

Miscellaneous: